

LITERACY PRACTICES AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS IN THE WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

Magdaline Mbong Mai

Languages, Cultural Studies and Applied Linguistics (LANCSAL), University of
Johannesburg, P.O. Box 524 Auckland Park, 2006 Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Language and critically thinking play a major role in academic performance. In multilingual contexts, multiple factors account for the way Second Language (L2) learners make sense of the academic texts they read. The students' multilingual and multicultural diversity impacts on their interpretation of academic texts. This article is derived from a work with mixed method but focuses on qualitative design. This article qualitatively analyses how L2 students read and interpret academic texts in South African Universities. Members of a study group were interviewed both as a group and individually. In the end, students' study practices towards academic literacy reveals translanguaging as one strategy of interpreting academic. One argument is that most African Universities have English as a medium of instructions whereas the students are often from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This diversity tends to influence the way students read and interpret academic texts.

KEYWORDS

Reading, university, academic texts, academic literacy, translanguaging

1. INTRODUCTION

Language and critically thinking are interrelated. Such a relationship has a vital role in students' academic success at tertiary level. While acknowledging the important contribution of other works on academic literacy focusing on primary or high school learners, Guthrie et al. (2000) and those from European contexts, Guthrie et al. (2004), this paper stands apart as it focuses on L2 tertiary students within a multilingual African context in Cape Town, South Africa. South Africa, with her eleven official languages, portrays a diversity which impacts on how students read and interpret academic texts.

This article is based on the group interactions of the third-year Material Design students in a University in the Western Cape province, South Africa where all five participants of the study group speak isiXhosa as L1. In spite of this common linguistic and cultural roots among these students, there seems to be different degrees of understanding of the academic text at hand and hence, the resultant variation in interpreting the text. This elicits translanguaging (Williams (1996), Gracia (2009), Canagarajah (2009) in academic development or group cohesion. In other words, since reading comprehension and the language of instruction are closely connected, a study of that discipline's language necessarily includes ways in which students make meaning from texts (cf. de Klerk 2000). This is synonymous to what Pennycook (2010) refers to as the ways of thinking and analysis of argument in a discipline. Despite the interesting debates around study groups, this work only emphasises how students read and interpret academic texts. According to Seligmann (2012), academic literacy can be defined in relation to the study of

language and the power that language has in connecting and interpreting the world in order to make meaning.

This paper uses a qualitative design to explore the reading and interpretation skills of a group of third year Language and Communication students to establish how they read academic texts. The conclusion in this article is that, a number of third year students seem to have discovered strategies that alleviate their academic reading challenges. These strategies are reflected in their study groups. These study groups are helpful in that they alleviate the linguistic burden placed on a single student since students in the group are able to brainstorm convivially using a language(s) of their choice (Canagarajah (2009), Gracia (2009)). First, I present the literature review, then, the research methods. Finally, I draw from the concept of translanguaging to discuss findings.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Most African students experience a complex sense of belonging. This emanates from their multilingual and multicultural beginnings. This intrinsic relation made the task of determining indexicalities of language choice in instances of interaction in multilingual settings complex. For instance, the social prestige of English among the other ten official languages in South Africa and even its status globally (de Klerk (2000), Mesthrie (2002), Canagarajah (2006, 2014) can index either a lingua franca or the hegemony of the language in wider society, or both. In corroboration, Turunen et. al. (2020) states that multilingual students share a complex sense of belonging. Given such complexities, there is need to consider ways in which multilingual students draw from the various linguistic repertoires available to them whether social or academic. Thus students' world view towards academic achievement is tantamount parents' collaboration (Sharabi, et al., 2022).

The students' worldview is mirrored in their language choices. For many scholars, translanguaging is perceived as another code switching. The phenomenon of translanguaging has experienced a progressive series of name tags starting from what Gutiérrez et al. (1999) had called hybrid language practice, Bakhtin's (1981); "heteroglossia", Bailey's, (2007) "polylingualism", and Canagarajah to Makoni et. al. (2007) "metrolingualism" and "plurilingualism". These various names are slightly different from one another in orientation. They however conceptualize the act of constructing meaning-in-context as a process of simultaneously accessing different linguistic features that were hitherto considered as separate and distinct "languages". The subjectivity involved in language use and the effects of globalization on language practice are now stressed: multilingual practice is now perceived as a systematic, strategic, meaning -making process. Translanguaging, a term formerly used by Cen Williams (1996) and later García (2009) to denote the practice of purposeful alternation of languages.

According to (de Klerk 2000 and Mesthrie, 2000, the social prestige of English among the other ten official languages in South Africa and even its status globally (Canagarajah 2006) can index either a lingua franca or the hegemony of the language in wider society, or both. Most African students experience a complex sense of belonging. This emanates from their multilingual and multicultural beginnings to which becomes more complex when added the prestigious English language. The intrinsic relation between language and academic development (Masouleh et al., 2012)) made the task of determining the indexicalities of language choice in instances of interaction in multilingual settings more complex. In corroboration, Ceginskas 2010, 2015) states that multilingual students share "a complex sense of belonging due to their multilingual origins". Accordingly, language choice, lived experiences and identity are inseparable from social variables such as the ethno-linguistic power relations operating within the society Pavlenko & Blackledge (2004). Given such complexities, there is need to consider ways in which multilingual students draw from the various linguistic repertoires available to them whether socio-cultural or

academic. Translanguaging, has brought an important perspective to the study of language and communication by promoting a shift from cross-linguistic influence to processes of how multilinguals intermingle linguistic features that would as well be meaningless to monolinguals.

1.2. Research Questions

- 1) What language will third year students use in their study groups.
- 2) How do the students' language preferences hinder and/or improve how the students read and interpret and their academic texts.
- 3) Do the students' L1 play a role when reading English texts.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data were sourced from observation of study groups, note-taking and open-ended follow-up interview questions at the end of every group session. However, this paper reports only on interviews, focus group discussions, note-taking and observations of one study group. A qualitative design illustrated the relationship between students' language choices and the impact this has on academic performance.

2.1. Research Instrument

The researcher used focus group observation and open-ended interviews which were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim to access students' literacy practices. The open-ended interviews were used to allow respondents to recount their reading experiences in a naturalistic manner. There were also follow-up interviews recorded by means of notetaking and an audio voice recorder with transcription of relevant sections.

2.2. Research Participants

Third-year Language and Communication students of the 2015 cohort doing language and Communication one South African University were the subjects. The study group on which this paper focused was made of five isiXhosa L1 (One of the 11 official languages of South Africa) speakers who met every Monday evening 3pm in a University library over a period of five months. They choose the library because it was favourable for studies and contained books that could directly assist them.

The sample of the study is drawn from 300 third-year students in one South African University in the Western Cape. The students usually work in small study groups during their study time. The students use a workbook designed by their lecturer. This workbook contains extracts from other academic texts and a number of exercises. The students often discuss these academic texts in preparation for a lecture and also, in order to complete various academic tasks for example, assignments and tests. About half the class responded to the questionnaires. This article however, focuses on the qualitative aspect of study and reports specifically on the activities of one study group.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Students who were willing to participate signed an informed consent form at the end of a lecture during the second semester on the first day of school. This same day, questionnaires were distributed to students. Only ninety-two out of three hundred students responded to the questionnaires since most students did not show up for lectures on the first day. From the

questionnaires, it was obvious that most students in the class worked in study groups. As the participation in the research was voluntary some students did not participate and just one study group was willing to continue participating in this study. The students in this study group responded to interview questions and follow-up interviews after study group sessions once a week. Their right for anonymity and ability to withdraw from the study was guaranteed.

2.4. Presentation of Data and Discussion

The specific headings presented below emanate from questions in students' workbook and their responses to the questions are also represented below. This section is also linked to the research questions and research aims to understand students' reading habits and suggest possible measures to address reading challenges.

These students study specific sections of the text, that is, they divide the relevant section into parts amongst themselves, but each and every one of them could read through the whole text, after having prepared their section. Their discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed and are discussed under the headings, Question 1– 2. For the sake of anonymity, I used pseudonyms throughout. The transcription key below was used.

Transcription Key

I have used the following conventions when transcribing:

Words in italics: reading

Inaudible/irrelevant utterances: ()

Interruptions/ Simultaneity/ overlapping = =

Researcher's guess/explanation []

- False start:

Adapted from Eggins et. al. (1997).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

One notices how students demystify the myth that English alone is suitable for students at Universities. English is major stumbling block for many South African students. English for instance, it is the language in which they have to write and read, and this language is often their second or possibly third language. To complicate this further, students are expected to read and prepare assignments in English.

3.1. Literacy Practices at among University Students

The specific headings presented below emanate from questions in students' workbook and their responses to the questions. This section is also linked to the research question and aims to understand students' reading habits.

Question 1: What overall conclusion did Alderson come to with the relationship between language proficiency and familiarity with the subject matter?

Anne: And the answer we came up with is language familiarity and the subject are like they work hand in hand but for a person- it is all sensible for a person to know his/her language, the first language first before knowing other language before being familiar with other languages = So that you can interpret it in your mind =

Mary = = yes cause = = [murmurs something in isiXhosa.

Jane = = before you answer the question

Audrey: For instance, now we read- for instance if I have to write an assignment I first read the question and then I will say maybe I don't understand the question then I will read it in my mind, in my own language =

Jude: mmmh (in agreement) = ()

Anne explains that language proficiency and familiarity with subject matter work hand-in-hand. The group members unanimously agree saying that; “[f]or instance now we read for instance if I have to write an assignment I first read the question and then I will say maybe I don't understand the question then I will read it in my mind, in my own language...” thus showing that students purposefully employ translanguaging understanding academic texts. For (Gutiérrez et. al., 2001, Canagarajah 2001), translanguaging was perceived as another code switching. The phenomenon of translanguaging has experienced a progressive series of name tags starting from what Gutiérrez et/ al's (2001) called hybrid language practice, then to and Pennycook's (2010) “metrolingualism” and “plurilingualism”. These names however conceptualize the act of constructing meaning-in-context as a process of simultaneously accessing different linguistic features that were hitherto considered as separate and distinct “languages”. The subjectivity involved in language use and the effects of globalization on language practice are now stressed: multilingual practice is now perceived as “a systematic, strategic, affiliating, and sense-making process” (Gutiérrez et. al., 2001:128).

Perhaps it is for this reason that Anne believes language proficiency and familiarity with subject matter work hand-in-hand. That is, proficiency in language can compensate for deficit knowledge of the subject matter and vice versa. Similarly, Anderson's (1999) posits that reading is an active and interactive process. All members in this group accept this point of view which again portrays active interaction with the text, and group cohesion. Therefore, students' interaction is both interpersonal and intrapersonal. As such, the interaction is not only mental but also social and translingual. To exemplify this, Jane for instance says she “[...] interpret it in my mind” and Anne talks of “...read it in my mind” while Mary, Jude and Audrey agree by nodding their heads. Mary goes ahead to epitomise these actions when she starts off by speaking English then murmurs something in isiXhosa. This relates to Cen Williams' (1996) and García's (2009) assertion that translanguaging denotes the practice of purposeful alternation of languages. Worthy of note here is the reading strategy where the students first use English to read then interpret in their L1 and also discuss in their L1 before translating writing in English.

Question 2: What in your own words, did Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) research show about the effect of familiar or unfamiliar settings on the way research participants processed texts?

Study Question 2 shows how students grapple with difficult texts. Jude insists that they read Steffensen et. al.'s (1984) quotation on familiar and unfamiliar settings before attempting to paraphrase. Audrey finally finds the relevant section in the book. Reads it aloud and relates it to her own words. Mary is very uncomfortable and insists they read the author's quotation again. She goes ahead to read the conclusion. Yet, their comments contradict their expectation because they know that they need to invest more time to read deeply in order to understand the texts with which they are expected to interact effectively. So, they say:

A lot of material to read and need to get into the habit of reading constantly.
Far more work and getting readings done in time is a problem.

At this juncture, they make allusion of pre-reading strategies. Anderson et al. (1979) proposed that the schemata embodying background knowledge influenced how well the text would be comprehended. However, Carrell (1998) posits there was no significant background effect in

advanced level learners. From these studies, it seems that background effect is different at different language proficiency levels. Given such complexities, there is need to consider ways in which multilingual students draw from the various linguistic repertoires available to them. Ghalmati et. al. (2022) further clarify this point declaring that the primary goal of higher education is not necessary in the mastery of content but in the comprehension and application of that content.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided a framework for the complex understanding of academic literacy and epistemological access in higher education by identifying specific challenges in academic reading. In spite of the many intervention programmes and benchmark tests set in place to support the heterogeneous cohorts and adequately place them students' ability to meet tertiary study requirements, in South Africa still remains a cause for concern.

Ultimately, the validity of a language among third year students in a study group is a strength for identifying the particular tasks students struggle with and, providing an account of how they resolve specific difficulties. In this case, insights and reading strategies are drawn from a study group to identify applicable intervention frameworks which contribute to resolving the aged-long problems of academic literacy.

Thus, it can be said the interaction between background knowledge and language proficiency in reading comprehension is important. However, language practices that permit students to engage with one another and the texts become imperative since this enables students to draw from available linguistic repertoire – translanguaging. In other words, although some intervention programmes do not take into consideration multilingual reading contexts, this study indicated that students' restrictive language use could hinder academic performance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all the research participants, especially the study group members who took their time to answer the various questions.

REFERENCES

- [1] Guthrie, J.T. & Wigfield, A. (2000) Engagement and motivation in reading. In M.L. Karmil, P.B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *The handbook of reading research* (Vol III, pp 403-420). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [2] Guthrie, J.T. & Humenick, N.M. (2004) Motivating students to read: Evidence for classroom practices that increase reading motivation and achievement. In P. McCardle, & V. Chhabra (Eds.), *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp 329-354). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- [3] Williams C. (1996) "Secondary education: Teaching in the bilingual situation". In C. Williams, G. Lewis, & C. Baker (Eds.), *The language policy: Taking stock* (pp39-78). UK: CAI Language Studies Centre.
- [4] Garcia, O. (2009a) *Bilingual education in the 21st Century: A global perspective*. West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing.
- [5] Canagarajah, S. and Jerskey, M. (2009) "Meeting the Needs of Advanced Multilingual Writers." In Roger Beard, Debra Myhill, Jeni Riley and Martin Nystrand (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Writing Development*. London: Routledge. pp472-488.
- [6] De Klerk, V. (2000) To be Xhosa or not to be Xhosa ... That is the Question. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. June 2000 DOI: 10.1080/01434630008666401
- [7] Pennycook, A. (2010) *Language as a Local Practice*. New York: Routledge.

- [8] Seligmann, J. (2012) *Academic literacy for education students*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa (Pty) Ltd.
- [9] Mesthrie, R. (2002) *Language in South Africa* (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). Negotiating the local in English as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 197-218.
- [11] Canagarajah, S. (2014). In search of a new paradigm for teaching English as an international language. *Tesol Journal*, 5(4), 767-785.
- [12] Turunen, J., Čeginskas, V. L., Kaasik-Krogerus, S., Lähdesmäki, T., & Mäkinen, K. (2020). Polyspace : Creating new concepts through reflexive team ethnography. In T. Lähdesmäki, E. Koskinen-Koivisto, V. L. Čeginskas, & A.-K. Koistinen (Eds.), *Challenges and Solutions in Ethnographic Research: Ethnography with a Twist* (pp. 3-20). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355608-1>
- [13] Gutiérrez; Kris D, Baquedano-López, P.; Carlos T. (1999) “Rethinking diversity: Hybridity and hybrid language practices in the third space”, *Mind, culture, and activity*, 6(4), pp286-303.
- [14] Sharabi, M. and Cohen-Ynonn G. (2022). Strategies Used to Gain an Effective Parental Involvement: School Administration and Teachers' Perceptions. *International Journal of Education*, 10, (3), DOI: 10.5121/ije.2022.10301
- [15] Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- [16] Bailey, B. (2007) *Heteroglossia and Boundaries*. In Heller, M. (2007). (ed). *Bilingualism: A Social Approach*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- [17] Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (2007) *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.makinu.
- [18] Masouleh, N. S., Jooneghani, R. B., Branch, J. A., & Iranote, L. S. (2012). Learner-Centered Instruction: A Critical Perspective. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 3(6), 50-59.
- [19] Čeginskas, Viktorija. 2010. Being ‘the strange one’ or ‘like everybody else’: School education and the negotiation of multilingual identity. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 7(3). 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790711003660476>.
- [20] Čeginskas, V. L. (2015). Exploring multicultural belonging: Individuals across cultures, languages and places. In *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis* (Vol. 411).
- [21] Pavlenko, A., & Blackledge, A. (Eds.). (2004). *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (Vol. 45). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [22] Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-López, P., & Alvarez, H. (2001). Literacy as hybridity: Moving beyond bilingualism in urban classrooms. *The best for our children: Critical perspectives on literacy for Latino students*, pp 122-141.
- [23] Canagarajah, S. (2001). Constructing Hybrid Postcolonial Subjects: Codeswitching in Jaffna Classrooms. In M. Heller and M. Martin-Jones (eds). *Voices of authority: Education and linguistic difference*. London: Ablex Publishing.
- [24] Eggins, S. And Slade, D. (1997) *Analysing Casual Conversation*. London: Cassell.
- [25] Alderson, J. C. (2000) *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- [26] Anderson, N. J. (1999). *Exploring second language reading: Issues and strategies* (pp. 53-56). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- [27] Steffensen, M. S., & Joag-Dev, C. (1984). Cultural knowledge and reading. *Reading in a foreign language*, pp 48-61.
- [28] Anderson, J. R., Kline, P. J., & Beasley Jr, C. M. (1979). A General Learning Theory and its Application to Schema Abstraction I. In *Psychology of learning and motivation* (Vol. 13, pp. 277-318). Academic Press.
- [29] Carrel, P. L. (1998) In Carrel, P. L. Devine, J. And Eskey, D.E. (eds). 1988. *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- [30] Ghalmat M., Alaoui sossai B. and Belkhou A., (2022) Higher education teachers’ perception, strategies and challenges in teaching critical thinking skills: a case study of higher school of technology fez-morocco, *International Journal of Education (IJE)*, Vol.10, No.1, pp 11-20. DOI: 10.5121/ije.2022.10102 11

AUTHOR

Mbong M. Mai completed a PhD in Linguistics and Language and Communication at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Mai's research interests include language and identity, transformation, language and migration, entrepreneurship, decolonisation, bilingualism and multilingualism, curriculum studies, and globalisation with interesting findings, some of which relate to the well-established perspectives on centre-periphery, territoriality, and identity formation. Mai has served as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), and as an Academic coordinator at the office of the Vice Chancellor: Academic Affairs for the Division for Postgraduate Studies at the University of the Western Cape and as a Sociolinguistics and Super-diversity fellow for the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. Currently, Mai is a senior researcher at the University of Johannesburg.

